

Georgia Joins the Quilt Trail Movement

A new form of folk art features colorful quilt patterns painted or displayed on rustic buildings, and the movement is drawing tourists to the new “quilt trails.”

JIM WINNERMAN

As she rounded a bend on a Kentucky two-lane country road in 2008, Suzi Parron of Stone Mountain was surprised to discover a colorful quilt pattern painted on a dark barn. Being a quilter herself, as were both of her grandmothers, she recalls that “seeing a familiar intricate geometric quilt design in a new way was a thrill.”

Parron stopped for a closer look. While speaking with the barn’s owner, she learned the square had been painted and placed to honor farming wives and their historic contribution to agriculture. She was told the painted quilt was just one of many forming a “quilt trail” in the area.

“I went online that same night to order a book on the subject and found none existed,” Parron remembers.

So Parron got in touch with Donna Sue Groves, who had the first quilt square applied to her barn in Athens, Ohio, seven years earlier. After Parron heard firsthand about the origin of the idea, she developed an even a greater appreciation for the new form of public art. Her acquaintance with Groves became a friendship, which led to a business partnership and the publication of *Barn Quilts and the American Quilt Trail Movement*, published by Ohio University Press in 2010.

Birth of the Quilt Trail Movement

There was never a grand plan beyond the single quilt square Groves painted on the family barn in 2001. It was just meant to honor her mother, Nina Maxine Groves, and her rural heritage, along with the five generations of her family that have shared a love of quilting.

When friends gathered at the Groves’ home to discuss painting her mother’s favorite “snail’s trail” pattern on the barn,

their conversation turned to a suggestion of a “trail of quilt barns” that the people in Adams County might enjoy. Groves’ mother mentioned that about 20 squares are on an average quilt, so that became the target for the number of barns to display quilt patterns.

So the quilt enthusiasts set off to find willing barn owners. Interest was instantaneous and participation so quick that the project took on a life of its own. Occupied with the burgeoning project, Groves wouldn’t see a quilt painted on her barn for three more years.

As each of the 20 Adams County, Ohio, quilt squares began to appear, photos and conversation about the project spread to other counties in the state, then to other states. Similar quilt-barn trail initiatives blossomed as quickly as a quilter buys fabric, eventually reaching Georgia in 2007.

“It was so rewarding to see the quilt squares finally popping up more and more in Georgia,” says Parron. “When I see one here it is just as unexpected and exciting as when I saw my first one!”

Donna Sue Groves never imagined that her idea would spread to 44 states and 4,000 barns and buildings (to date). Like the quilt paintings in Georgia, almost all of those in other states are located along quilt barn trails, giving everyone a new reason to explore the countryside.

While quilt squares in other states have been mostly limited to barns and other farm buildings, those in Georgia are most often painted on the sides of businesses or public buildings. The first Georgia quilt blocks appeared in Powder Springs, just west of Atlanta, in 2008.

“Joe Sutton is our florist in town, and he had seen them in Tennessee and researched the topic,” says Gloria Hilderbrand, who at the time was a co-owner of the Country Store of Seven Springs. “He thought they would be a good idea for our little business district.”

Eight point star pattern on barn owned by Jamie Bennett in Buchanan.





Grandmothers flower garden pattern on the Book Worm book store in Powder Springs.

While Hilderbrand is not a quilter, she does have a collection of more than 300 quilts, so she immediately embraced the idea. Soon afterward, two eight-foot by eight-foot squares appeared on opposite sides of the Country Store building. Then Hilderbrand began to envision a trail of quilt patterns. She visited nearby

towns to garner support for the idea outside Cobb County. Enthusiasts in Paulding, Carroll, Heard and Haralson counties signed on, intent on forming what they named the Southern Quilt Trail. Following a path spread across 50 miles of Georgia countryside, that trail now includes 28 vividly painted squares.

A set of criteria exists for those interested in joining the trail. "The idea is to bring attention to a building that has had a tie to an historic event, person or business in the community," says Gail Priest, tourism coordinator for the chamber of commerce in Haralson County. "We also wanted them on structures that are least 50 years old, placed where they can be seen from a paved road, and in a location that is well-maintained."

Once painted, each quilt pattern is marked by a plaque that relates the significance of the building or site to the area's history. Patterns are also selected with a purpose. Hilderbrand chose a lone-star pattern that was a favorite in

her collection of quilts. Her business co-owner, Diane Reese, decided on a double Irish chain pattern because of fond memories associated with a quilt given to her by a friend. Since wedding ceremonies include flowers, Joe Sutton, the Powder Springs florist, selected a double wedding ring pattern to display over the entrance to his store.

The Main Street Antique store in Hiram, dating to 1890, is owned by Bob and Kathy Bookout. Beside the store entrance is an eight-point star quilt pattern. "We selected it because it was a pattern that was in vogue during the same period as when the building was new," Bob says. "The building was a dry goods store downstairs and a Masonic Hall upstairs."

The picturesque Little Creek Schoolhouse in Buchanan dates to 1870 and was in use until 1932. Today, the outside log walls are appropriately decorated with a quilter's square known as the schoolhouse pattern.

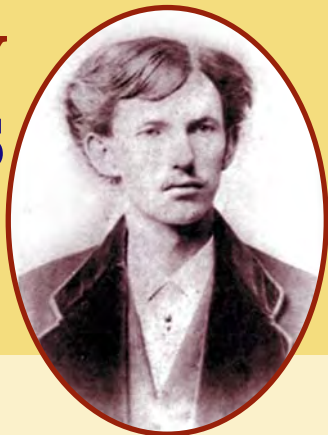
Painting the patterns along the

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Southern Quilt Trail has been accomplished several ways. Most often, the store owner undertakes the task and pays the several hundred dollars needed for paint and material. “We have also had middle and high school art classes help,” Priest notes. “In some instances, a ‘tourism team’ from a county volunteered to do the work.”

In the northeast Georgia town of Lavonia, the chamber of commerce began sponsoring a quilt trail in 2010. Today there are 27 blocks on display, with more to follow. Lionel Michaud laid out each one. “I have a drafting background, and that helps with the layout, which can be complicated,” he says. He also ended up painting those around town.

Most of Lavonia’s painted quilt squares are on buildings, such as schools, churches, restaurants, the library and the chamber of commerce building. Several are freestanding and positioned in front of a building between two posts, with different patterns on each side. Susan Poole, the publicity chairperson for the local chamber of commerce, notes that the chamber oversees the program to ensure that the color schemes and patterns aren’t duplicated.

Michaud points out that the designs are selected from two quilt pattern books in the public domain. Each selection is made with the goal of tying the pattern

to the building in some way. The first square put up at the Lavonia welcome center displays the friendship pattern, a selection town officials say symbolizes the friendly welcome visitors receive.

Each time a new square is added, the

community holds a presentation ceremony at the unveiling. “We always have a good crowd of at least 20 people,” Michaud laughs. “Whenever the paper is torn off there are a lot of ‘oohs and ahhs’ and clapping. The squares are all over town,” he adds, noting that he can see several while standing in the doorway of the chamber of commerce building.

As the Franklin Quilt Trail expands, new squares are planned for homes. “There is a lady in town that lost her house to a fire, but she was able to salvage a few squares from quilts her grandmother made,” Michaud relates. “She wants one of her grandmother’s patterns on her home, and I told her I would be glad to make it. There is no telling how many more we will do, but it is nice to walk around and see how they bring new color into the town, and to be able to say I did them.”

In Ellijay, Mona Lowe, who is the local Better Hometown manager, is helping create the North Georgia Quilt trail.



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"We want to develop new methods to attract visitors to our area, and the colorful squares add interest," she says. "We also want to recognize those historic structures that are over 50 years old. A quilt trail is the perfect method to accomplish that objective."

Lowe's plan is to have what she calls "art squares" sprinkled around town, with patterns that may be non-traditional quilt squares created by shop owners but which bring color and attention to the community. Thus far, the five patterns on display have received favorable reviews. Shop owners report that visitors who stop to admire a square are invariably drawn into the store. "They always want to know why the square was painted, which leads into a history of the building and the area," Lowe says. "That is what we hoped would happen."

In the countryside around Ellijay, Lowe foresees quilt patterns that tell a story about the farms, buildings, and pioneers. "Perhaps it will be a pattern that was a favorite of the great-grandmother who once lived there," she says. "The idea is to honor the history of what occurred at a site by erecting a quilt pattern that has meaning there. Also, since we are the 'Apple Capital of Georgia,' we want to include our historic apple sheds."

Jim Harmon, a local painter, wood carver and photographer, painted the squares in Ellijay. He is quick to note that anyone can paint one, but his involvement in the project led him to design his own quilt pattern, which he named "Ellijay Crossroads." A local quilter is in the process of making the quilt. "Soon



Friendship star pattern unveiling at Lavonia Depot.

the pattern will be painted on a building in town," Harmon says.

"We are anxious to get the trail growing and see it spread," Lowe adds. "We named our trail the 'North Georgia Quilt Trail' because we hope to have surrounding counties join in at some point."

Several states do feature multiple quilt trails that include 30 or more squares each. Tourists can "piece together" trails, similar to how squares are stitched together to form a quilt. The result is a colorful journey, often along rural, two-lane country roads to quaint little towns and communities.

The quilt-trail movement has become so popular that many consider it a new form of folk art that helps get travelers off interstate highways and into the less-traveled countryside. Many quilt-trail communities have printed maps featuring photos of each pattern, an explanation of why the patterns were chosen, and histories of the display buildings.

Some trails even have videos on the hometown website.

"We have a lot of tourists passing through here," Lowe says, referring to the mountainous area around Ellijay that is a haven for mountain bikers, canoeists, fishermen and people renting cabins for getaways. "Once we have our trail well established there will be another reason to visit." ■

Jim Winnerman is a freelance writer. His articles have appeared in magazines and newspapers coast to coast.

Franklin County: <http://franklincountyquilttrail.wordpress.com/>

North Georgia Quilt Trail in Ellijay: http://www.northgeorgiaquilttrail.com/N_GA_Quilt_Trail.php

Southern Quilt Trail: <http://www.southernquilttrail.org/index.html>

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